Tahrir's Youth: Leaders of a Leaderless Revolution, by Rusha Latif. Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2022; pp. 337.

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Rusha Latif's *Tahrir's Youth: Leaders of a Leaderless Revolution* (2022) joins the body of published books that contribute to a historiography of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. The book opens with an "Introduction" which frames the whole project by addressing leadership in social movements and the agency of young people in the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. Then follow seven chapters, each divided into connected sections with the last chapter serving as a conclusion. The central argument of the book is that the January 2011 Revolution that mobilised millions of Egyptians to take to the streets was not an uprising triggered by a single major event, but a result of years of organising and protests that escalated within the Egyptian opposition and culminated in the emergence of various movements. The book describes and discusses the role of Egyptian youth through years of political struggle and activism – from the turn of the twenty-first century to the Tahrir Square protests of January 2011 and beyond. Also included in the book are an informative appendix, elaborate notes and bibliography, and a detailed index, in addition to maps and images inserted throughout the text; a total of almost a hundred pages of additional material for readers to explore.

The "Introduction" opens with a description of the author's experience in Tahrir, which provides detailed first-hand eye-witness mapping of the location, slogans, chants, and the "Rules of the Square" (2), thus situating the author, Rusha Latif, as a reliable participant-observer in the research project. The narrative then shifts to the main argument on which Latif bases her research: the power of the Egyptian youth, rather than the widely propagated role of social media, in triggering and sustaining the revolution (4). The main focus of the study is on the leaders of the Revolutionary Youth Coalition (RYC), "the first revolutionary entity to announce itself from Tahrir Square during the

early eighteen-day uprising" that "functioned as one of its main nerve centers" (4), and whose members had been active political activists for years from a variety of ideological backgrounds. The author then explains her methodological approach, placing it within social movement theory and history. She also provides definitions of youth leadership and activist agency, taking into consideration the intersections of ideology, class, and gender. Chapter One, "Encountering Revolution: Expectations and Reality", situates the author vis-à-vis the research, highlighting her connection to Egypt in personal and cultural terms and her decision, as a second-generation Egyptian American young woman, to turn her personal interest in the daily developments of the Egyptian uprising into a doctoral research project using methods of ethnographic data collection. It is in this chapter that the author describes her multifaceted positionality in Tahrir as "Middle-class, American, female, and veiled" (22), pointing out her consciousness of her complex feelings of belonging yet alienation, which she describes in terms of "subjective duality" (23), specifically as it emerged during her fieldwork experience. In the last section of the chapter, the author briefly describes the backgrounds of the twenty-five activists (members of the RYC), while focusing her analysis on interviews with ten of them.

Chapter Two, "The Contract Collapses", seeks to delve into the history of Egypt in order to contextualise the 2011 Revolution. The author therefore goes back to what she considers the root of the general discontent since the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, with its unfulfilled promises of the "tacit social contract" (43) between the Egyptian people and the military regime. The chapter is divided into several sections, and begins by situating the January 2011 Revolution within a history of the three successive presidents of the Egyptian Republic from the mid-1950s until January 2011: Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak. The chapter highlights the consequences of the military defeat in the 1967 war with Israel, together with the failure to provide "the promise of economic prosperity" (44) despite the victory in the October War in 1973 and the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty in 1979. This in turn led, over the decades, to the gradual and total subjugation of the Egyptian economy to the requirements of USAID programmes and IMF directives. These politico-economic policies triggered protests and mass mobilisations, such as the Bread Riots of the 1970s, the popular committees supporting the Palestinian Intifada since the 1990s, and the anti-war protests following the

American invasion of Iraq. It was this gradual organising - which intensified at the turn of the century - together with the approaching presidential elections, that created "a game-changing moment that emerged in 2004 and set a new precedent for collective action and political dissent" (52), leading to the creation of the Kefaya (Enough) movement that brought together communists, socialists, liberals, Nasserists, Islamists, and independents. This, in turn, inspired the active engagement of Egyptian youth, such as the April 6 Movement, the Youth for Justice and Freedom Movement, the ElBaradei Campaign for Presidency, the National Association for Change, and the Khaled Said Campaign, which all came together in the call for mass action on 25 January 2011.

Chapter Three, "Rethinking Spontaneity: Youth Political Agency Before the Uprising", challenges the general claims that attribute the uprising to "spontaneity" and the role of social media, consigning such claims to "a-historicity" (63). The chapter uses ethnographic research methods to provide a counter-argument through a close study of the personal narratives of nine young men and one woman who were members of the RYC formed in January 2011 in Tahrir. The chapter presents the profiles of these members with a particular interest in "class dimensions, religious affiliation, and political histories" (64). The interviews reveal several important dimensions related to the ideological backgrounds of these activists, including the roles of their politically involved families and their growing up in underprivileged neighbourhoods, which contributed to raising their political awareness. Through the interviews, the chapter also discusses the role of the university and political parties as spaces for political awareness, engagement, and activism pre-January 2011. The chapter ends by dismantling the "myth of Western influence" (106), stressing the young activists' dismissal of the Western protest movements' influence on their own revolutionary activism in Egypt. The author concludes her analysis by stressing that the Tahrir youth were deeply rooted in Egyptian history and reality, and stating that their personal and collective "embeddedness in the country's political and socio-economic trajectory" shaped their "revolutionary subjectivities" (108).

Chapter Four, "Youth Activists and Revolutionary Praxis", covers the period known as the first eighteen days in Tahrir (25 January -11 February), that is, from the first day of demonstrations until Mubarak's stepping down from power. The author traces the notion of leadership among the young members of

the RYC as they find themselves at the fore of the Revolution, negotiating their own leadership positions. They do so as they confront the central questions: "What is happening?" and "How should we act?" (109), while contemplting how to steer the unexpected massive participation of the people in the demonstrations as well as build up the revolutionary momentum and push it forward. The chapter examines the revolutionary praxis itself, starting before 25 January. The interviewees explain the details involved in bringing together ideologically different groups, developing the slogans, agreeing on the demands, and setting up mobilisation tactics, among many other preparatory aspects. The second part of the chapter addresses the management of the uprising on 25 January, an analysis of which leads the author to the conclusion that the eighteen-day occupation of Tahrir "was neither a spontaneous popular uprising, nor a carefully planned revolution" (151). In Chapter Five, "Participation, Subjectivity, and Imagination", the author continues tracing the subjectivities of the RYC leaders with the purpose of identifying the transformations on the personal and political levels. To situate the youth mainly within their organisations, the chapter starts with a brief overview of the following: the April 6 Movement, the Youth for Justice and Freedom Movement, the ElBaradei Campaign, and the Muslim Brotherhood. The analysis then centres around specific aspects of subjectivity: self, gender, class, religion, and politics, as well as an exploration of the young people's visions for democracy and a modern Egypt, while conveying their awareness of the history of British colonialism together with contemporary Western neoliberalism and US imperialism. The interviews themselves reveal a general concern among these young people with change, and their roles as agents of change – nationally, regionally, and globally.

Having provided an ethnographic analysis of the RYC leaders' narratives about themselves and their political involvement in the January uprising, the author focuses in Chapter Six, "The Making and Unmaking of Revolutionary Youth Leadership", on the manifestations of youth leadership in the Tahrir context. The chapter clearly articulates some of the main findings of the study about leadership, agency, gender, class, religion and ideology, which can be summarised in the following points. First, the 25 January 2011 uprising was not an act of spontaneous protest, nor was it leaderless; it was the outcome of over a decade of activism towards political change; in the author's words, "it

was not leaderless, spontaneous, or rooted in social media" (187). Rather, it was the product of over a decade of political activism, intensified in the movements and campaigns created in the years leading to January 2011, during which many young people, including the RYC leaders, played founding and leadership roles. Second, there is a clear gender gap in the representation of women in leadership positions, as the author's fieldwork research revealed that "although men and women were equally engaged in organizing the movement, their leadership roles were gendered" (190). This gap is further intensified by class and ideology, as the interviews showed how specifically the Muslim Brotherhood and Sisterhood consciously refrained from placing women in leadership positions but kept them "behind the scenes" as "silent partners" (192). Third, the author states that the Western media representation of the leaders of the uprising as middle and upper-middle-class, Western-educated, cosmopolitan, technologically savvy young men and women is a false image. She shows how "this image belied reality" since the majority of the youth interlocutors defined themselves as belonging to the struggling "popular class" (194). Lastly, the author admits that her hypothesis about religiosity and leadership was wrong, and it became clear to her that leadership was related to "political ideology" rather than "personal religious practice" (198).

The final chapter, "The Revolution Continues?", moves beyond the January uprising, and questions what has happened to the Revolution that followed. Writing a few years after the January 2011 Revolution, the author finds that "the mood is one of defeat and resignation", while the counterrevolution prevails and "critical voices are demonized and excluded" (216). Reviewing the events of the years that followed, which witnessed the Muslim Brotherhood's rise and fall, followed by the military rise to power, the author emphasises the importance of acknowledging the young leaders' revolutionary achievements despite "the activists' failings, strategic errors, and missed opportunities" (257). Among the greatest achievements with which the author concludes her book is that January 2011 is a revolution in the way it "politicized and transformed legions of apathetic young people" (258). She ends her book with the assertion that "the revolution continues" (260).

All in all, unlike the scores of works of poetry, fiction, non-fiction, memoirs, and articles about the Tahrir as experience, location, phenomenon, and icon, this

book is a work of scholarship grounded in socio-political reality that combines personal experience with historical and ethnographic research. Published eleven years after the events, it allows the reader space for a retrospective reflection and a critical reading of the period and its consequences. For the global and Western reader, it provides a narrative of the 'Egyptian Arab Spring' that argues against most of the Western discourses about the spontaneous leaderless revolution of cosmopolitan Western-educated youth. Through the interviews and participant observation, the author provides a reliable alternative narrative that sheds light on the reality. On the other hand, for those of us who experienced the Revolution, and continue to live under its consequences, the book provides profiles of people we know and events we witnessed, and as such offers a documentation of our own history and experience. Finally, for academics around the world, this book is the product of a serious and rigorous research process that provides another solid addition to the scholarship on the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, as well as on Social Movements theory and praxis. It does not provide a final narrative, but it opens up areas for further interdisciplinary research in the humanities and social sciences – addressing more elaborately, for example, issues such as gender and the location of the January 2011 Revolution in the history of the Egyptian feminist movement.